

Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook, edited by Conor McCarthy, offers a broad and useful collection of texts addressing the named issues. The greatest strengths of the collection are its fresh and novel approach (it is the only sourcebook dedicated to these issues) and the wide variety of sources the editor has gathered. This wide range of texts allows McCarthy to accomplish the goal he states in the Introduction: not to offer a single homogeneous view of love, sex, and marriage in the medieval period, but rather to demonstrate the varieties and differences that exist within medieval writings on these subjects. The greatest weakness of this otherwise fine collection is some unfortunate choice of texts that seem to exaggerate the gender inequalities inherent in much of this material.

McCarthy has done a good job of putting together a diverse set of texts. Though it is disappointing that the collection is limited to materials written or circulated in England, the editor has otherwise used wide parameters in choosing his sources. He has included both religious and secular sources, canon law and hagiography, personal letters, chronicles, literature, law codes, and a small (though welcome) section of material drawn from medical texts.

Many of the selections are quite lengthy, occasionally giving the full text of a source rather than just the snippets so often found in such collections. The texts are divided by genre, and the selections in each section are generally presented chronologically. McCarthy's introductions to the collection and individual sections provide useful historiographic contexts for the debates and differences of opinion presented in the sources. Citations of recent scholarship and the final bibliography are very helpful, and should provide students with pertinent and timely references for further reading and research. In most ways, then, the mechanics of the book, its organization and presentation, work well.

As promised, the variety of materials offers a complex view of love, sex, and marriage in the Middle Ages. McCarthy intentionally included material on the controversy over what constituted marriage and the problems created by the Church's eventual position that consent, not consummation, made a marriage. Beyond that, however, the collection offers abundant insight into the diversity of ideas and practices surrounding love, sex, and marriage. While treatises by Augustine and church law present the Church's ideals, selections from secular law and literature reveal that



lay attitudes, let alone lay practice, differed considerably from ecclesiastical prescriptions. A selection from Augustine's *City of God* presents love as a complex reality that could be used well or poorly, while Andreas Capellanus argues that love is only possible outside the bounds of marriage, and Constantine the African discusses lovesickness as a form of illness. Marriage is not only debated, it is idealized, satirized, and rejected. The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wife's Lament* reveals deep affection between husband and wife, but an anonymous poem, *De Coniuge non Ducenda*, is blatantly anti-matrimonial and advises men to avoid marriage at all costs. Still other texts, such as the story of Christina of Markyate's efforts to remain chaste, present virginity as preferable to marriage. The collection includes evidence of sexual activity of all kinds and a variety of responses to this. Ecclesiastical court cases punish adultery while the fabliau *A Peasant from Bailleul* celebrates it. We read Chaucer's rather ambivalent *Portrait of the Pardoner* as well as outright denunciations of same sex activity, such as Etienne de Fougères' derogatory description of sexual relations between women. In many ways, then, McCarthy has achieved his goal. It would be hard to read this collection and not see

the diverse and often conflicting ideas about love, sex, and marriage that circulated in medieval England.

The difficulty with this collection is the overall impression it gives the reader of female victimization. Although McCarthy includes only a few unashamedly misogynistic selections, the sense of disadvantaged and abused women is clear. In both ecclesiastical and secular texts, for example, we see women punished more strictly than men for the same sexual offenses. When marriage is decried as a source of pain and misery by either Jerome or a later anonymous poet, the responsibility for this condition is laid squarely at the feet of the wife. Even in more sympathetic texts, such as the book of conduct by the *Ménagier of Paris*, we see an expectation of women's behavior based on their complete obedience and subservience to men. In a sense, the negative image of women is unavoidable. The sources are, of course, almost all written by men living in a social and cultural context that believed in women's innate inferiority. Moreover, the reality of medieval misogyny is most likely to appear in texts dealing with the very issues this sourcebook is addressing. Nevertheless, it is a discouraging read.

This leads me to question McCarthy's choice of texts, in some

cases. For example, he includes a canon from the Penitential of Theodore which states that "he who is joined to a beast shall do penance for fifteen years" and a selection from Gerald of Wales' *History and Topography of Ireland* that describes women who willingly having intercourse with animals and thereby produce monsters. These texts suggest, perhaps, that both men and women were equally imagined as being capable of bestiality, but the choice of selections leaves an inaccurate impression. Medieval texts more commonly refer to bestiality as a male failing, yet readers are far more likely to be impressed by and remember the three page selection from Gerald than the one line from Theodore. There are also few real women speaking or acting independently in the collection. While the material from *The Life of Christina of Markyate* and *The Book of Margery of Kempe* offer examples of determined women, these are virtually the only examples of women speaking up for themselves. It would have been possible to include more and stronger female voices. For example, McCarthy could have used Heloise's impassioned and eloquent arguments against marriage to counterbalance such misogynistic anti-matrimonial texts as *Against Jovinian*. The collection could also have included Christine de Pizan's defense of women, rather than only her version of the Griselda story. Such

adjustments do not, of course, alter the reality of women's subordination in medieval society, especially in terms of sexuality, and McCarthy's choice of materials is in many other ways excellent. Overall, then, this collection is a fresh and welcome addition to classroom resources for the study of women in the Middle Ages.

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